

On March 15, 2004, the Wolodymyr George Danyliw Foundation hosted its second Annual Lecture on Contemporary Ukraine. Mykola Riabchuk—prominent Ukrainian scholar and intellectual, Research Associate at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and Kolasky Fellow at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies—presented “From Dysfunctional to Blackmail State? The Post-Soviet Transition in Ukraine.” Professor Riabchuk proposed a new approach to evaluating political developments in Ukraine, based on the idea of a blackmail, as opposed to weak or dysfunctional, state.

In the early stages of transition, analysts believed that the difficulties of reforming post-communist societies, such as Ukraine, were related to the weak institutional capacity of the state. Mykola Riabchuk refuted this theory, arguing that a lack of progress in democratic reforms resulted not from the state’s inability but rather unwillingness to implement policies aimed at satisfying public needs. According to Professor Riabchuk, serving the public, in fact, is not the real goal of the Ukrainian state. In its present form, the Ukrainian state exists to serve the interests of narrow political and economic elites, who can best maintain their power and wealth precisely in the current ambiguous climate of uncompleted reforms and, therefore, are motivated to sustain, rather than change, the status quo.

After the collapse of the communist system, Ukraine advertised itself as a new democracy in transition. It adopted the institutional forms of democracy, such as regular presidential and parliamentary elections, and in 1995 became a member of the Council of Europe. However, in contrast to such countries as Portugal, Spain, Greece, Slovenia, Estonia, or Poland, Ukraine never underwent a complete democratic revolution, a radical break with its authoritarian past. The old communist nomenclature maintained its powerful position in the post-communist state, or, rather, built its own state, effectively transforming the communist party apparatus into the presidential administration. According to Professor Riabchuk, the political regime, thus created, continues to operate on the ambiguous spoken rules—“telephone law” rather than rule of law. Through a system of informal structures and blackmail instruments of control top, politicians manipulate democratic institutions to an extent that their power is hardly ever threatened. He described Ukrainian democracy as a bucket with a hole at the bottom. No matter how much water you pour in the bucket (i.e., how many democratic features you introduce), this water is not going to stay in the bucket. Behind the democratic façade, the same old nomenclatura manipulate the system. The system may look like democracy on the outside, but in fact the authoritarian regime behind the democratic façade never transforms into a true democracy. The hole is not large (the regime wants to maintain a democratic appearance), but is not small either (the top politicians, such as President Kuchma, his administration, and the oligarchs are quite careful in how they maintain their power); it is just the right size—the methods of control used by the president and other members of the political elite are effective enough for them to stay in power.

In Professor Riabchuk’s analysis, this system, based on sophisticated methods of power retention, has proven to be quite stable. The political elites are unwilling to introduce any policies that might threaten their hold on power. The oligarchs are satisfied; under the present regime they enjoy relative independence. The system functions according to the

old rule, be loyal and you will get protection, protect and you will get loyalty. The difficulty of changing the regime from the outside is another safeguard of its stability. The press is controlled, the public threatened and alienated, and potential opposition blackmailed.

According to Professor Riabchuk, the intricate legal field in the corrupt Ukrainian economy acts as a minefield that can potentially destroy any opponent to the regime. Although the state maintains an appearance that everything is done according to law, the law is applied very selectively. Politically motivated tax inspections are common. For example, although a number of independent TV and radio stations have lost their licenses as a result of minor legal irregularities found in their operations, state-owned “Channel I” functions without a license, which simply expired a while ago. Professor Riabchuk concludes that corruption is an essential systemic element of state control and, therefore, the alleged weakness of the state can be interpreted as its perverted strength.

Despite a somewhat grim presentation of the political situation in Ukraine, the lecture ended on a hopeful note. According to Professor Riabchuk, although the country may be close to totalitarianism, it has also never been as close to true democracy. What will shift the balance one way or another? In his analysis, Ukrainian nascent civil society may facilitate some kind of positive change, similar to Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. The regime is not monolithic and can be further fragmented by the diverse economic and political interests of its elites. Due to its geopolitical position, Ukraine will continue to attract international attention, which will hopefully “use more sticks for authoritarianism and more carrots for civil society,” similar to the Western strategy in Yugoslavia. According to Professor Riabchuk, assertive behavior on that part of the Ukrainian opposition combined with appropriate Western help may enable Ukraine’s ambiguous transformation to turn into a true democracy. Alternatively, a lack of such efforts may lead to true totalitarianism—the worst-case scenario for the country and the region in general.

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